2:Scott G-5 (1870's-1909)1910 AP1 Burma
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spire. To show the soles of the feet to the throne is high treason. This is awkward for the inhabitants of some quarters, for there is a rule applying to all Buddhists, that they must not place their feet towards the east, where the sun rises and whence the next Buddha, Arimadeya, will come, nor to the west, where the bawdi bin stands, or stood, the tree under which Shin Gautama attained the supreme wisdom. The superstition is probably derived from the Brahmins, who threaten grievous dangers to the man who places his feet on the shadow of a dewa, a king, a teacher, a saint, or another man's wife.

The frequent change of locality of the palace, and therefore of the capital, is a peculiarity of Burma. There are about a score of towns in the country which have been at one time or other the metropolis. Such are Tagaung, Old Pagān, and Shwebo, above Mandalay; Prome (under the title Tharekettara), Pagān, Sagaing, Ava, and Amarapura, below it. The last two are the best known; indeed some people to the present day persist in talking of the "Kingdom of Ava," though that once brilliant capital has been little better than a jungle for a great many years, and the lines of the old walls can only be traced with difficulty.

It is hardly correct to say, as most writers on Burma have hitherto done, that with a new king there should be a new capital. This has very frequently been the case, but the matter does not altogether depend upon the accession of a new sovereign. It is brought about by a very much more gruesome (the word is used advisedly) circumstance. On the foundation of a new capital, there are always a certain number of people buried alive. The idea is that they become nat-thein, that their spirits haunt the place where they were put to death, and attack all persons approaching with malevolent intentions. The notion is entirely due to the royal astrologers, the Brahmin pônnas, and as being repugnant to the tenets of Buddhism, is strenuously denounced by the true brethren of the yellow robe. But it fits in very well with the popular superstition regarding the existence of spirits, and has hence always firmly maintained its ground. It is a matter of common knowledge that this idea of

14: Brant E-5 (1949-50) 1954 APl Burma
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thinking, being the mother of a son is itself considered the greatest event of a woman's life and represents the achievement of full existence as a female human being. The relationship is close and indulgent. The mother is regarded by her son as more important than his wife; in fact, a son normally will choose a wife with a great deal of regard for his mother's opinions and wishes. 593

Mother and Daughter. The mother is her daughter's early teacher. It is considered most important for the girl to learn prayers, how to prepare the daily food offering, and how to change the flowers on the household altar. These things are taught almost from the time the child begins to speak and understand. Other household duties in which a mother instructs her daughter vary considerably with the economic status of the family. In poor families some assistance with tending animals and winnowing the rice is part of the girl's work from about the age of ten. Daughters are expected to show filial respect and deference equally to the mother and father. 593 968 [565]

Father and Son. The father occupies the role of disciplinarian in the family. Disciplining of sons may include physical punishment, though such measures are not resorted to readily. Prior to adolescence, boys are taught prayers and good habits by their mothers, with the father remaining more or less in the background and interfering only when disciplinary action may be required of him. After a son passes adolescence the father becomes important as his mentor. 593 861

Husband and Wife's Elder Sister. This relationship tends to mirror a conflict between age and sex as status factors in the social structure. There is an implicit conflict between the husband's position as a man and his wife's elder sister's position, in many cases, as his senior, having a claim on outward respect and obedience. In practice this relationship is often cool and aloof in nature, very much in contrast to the free and easy one between a man and his wife's younger sisters. 607 182 602

Husband and Wife's Younger Sister. A man is expected to show great favor to his wife's younger sisters and to display more interest in them than in his own sisters. He buys them presents, gives them spending money when he can, and covertly he is expected to be on the lookout for prospective husbands for them. Quite frequently, the wife's younger sisters will accompany her and her husband when she marries, and all will live together in the same house. Although husband and wife's younger sisters engage in a great deal of mutual joking and teasing, the relationship does not normally assume a sexual aspect. Polygyny is permissable but very rarely practiced; when it is, however, it takes the sororal form. The rather free and easy relationship between a husband and his wife's younger sisters sometimes gives rise to village gossip -- especially when it is known that he and his wife are not getting along well -- that he is carrying on love affairs with his younger sisters-in-law. 607 587

In-laws. A daughter-in-law is definitely subordinate to her mother-in-law. If they live in the same household, the mother-in-law is entitled to the best room and to be waited upon by her daughter-in-law. Significantly, the Burmese word for daughter-in-law (ewèimh) means 'sweat women. 606

The term for son-in-law (Ganet) means 'desired son.' A son-in-law is a privileged member of his wife's family. His wishes are respected and his comforts looked after. His mother-in-law instructs her younger children to show him respect and deference.

14: Brant E-5 (1949-50) 1954 AP1 Burma
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Indians

621 consider, because they did not want to lose the Indians as customers for their paddy stalk and as a source of manure for their gardens and fields.

563 The headman of Tadagale, when queried as to the reasons for the departure of the Indians, shrugged his shoulders and said simply that they were afraid, despite the plans for village defense, that their animals might be injured in the event of any fighting between villagers and bandits.

Within a few days, the Indians of Tadagale had all departed; and in the vacant spaces where their houses had stood, the Burmese were eagerly at work erecting buildings of their own.

Social Change

175 631 622 626 Prior to effective British rule in Lower Burma (about 1830), the local autonomous unit was the village circle, consisting of several villages under the authority of a headman. The office of headman seems to have been hereditary in fact, although elections were held. That is to say, headmen tended to be elected in a particular lineage. Rule was through personal relationship between the headman and the villagers. Under the circle headman was a council of elders, appointed by him, one from each village in the circle. Disputes were almost entirely settled by arbitration and compromise, rather than with any concern over the abstract legal right and wrong of the case.

621 Within the village, a system called 'ten-house heads' was operative. This system appears to have been operative through British times, but at least since 1948 has lost effectiveness. Tadagale houses are strung out along a main path, and the ten-house division is such that the houses belonging to one group are mostly contiguous. The head of each ten-house section acted as a kind of deputy to the headman and sat on the council of elders.

175 631 622 With the coming of British rule, much of this changed. They established a hierarchical system, in which there were, in descending order of size, nation, division, district, township, village circle, and village. All officials at each level were appointed from the capital, even down to the village level, where the headman was made an appointed civil servant. He was paid on a percentage basis of his total tax collections and fines levied. The circle headman had police power and judicial authority in petty crimes.

175 692 A judicial system was introduced by the British to replace the old informal arbitration. With an almost total disregard for indigenous institutions and customs, the British established a territorial system based upon law. The loosely structed and informal system of old gradually broke down.

669 631 182 Early in 1948 Burma gained her independence. Since that time the country has been in a state of disorganization. The civil strife has brought about an almost complete breakdown of administrative function on many levels. Certainly the ties of the village with higher units have been curtailed. One indication of this is the fact that the headman no longer submits reports with any degree of regularity to higher echelons, as was required under British rule. Even the local ten-house heads council has largely ceased to function. It exists, but is scarcely used.

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

seemed to me a mystery such as I could not understand. But when I went to the people, I found that it was simple enough to them; for I found that they remembered their former lives often, that children, young children, could tell who they were before they died, and remember details of that former existence. As they grew older the remembrance grew fainter and fainter, and at length almost died away. But in many children it was quite fresh, and was believed in beyond possibility of a doubt by all the people. So I saw that the teachings of their sacred books and the thoughts of the people were not at one in this matter.

Again, I read that there was no God. Nats there were, spirits of great power like angels, and there was the Buddha (the just man made perfect), who had worked out for all men the way to reach surcease from evil; but of God I saw nothing. And because the Buddha had reached heaven (Nirvana), it would be useless to pray to him. For, having entered into his perfect rest, he could not be disturbed by the sharp cry of those suffering below; and if he heard, still he could not help; for each man must through pain and sorrow work out for himself his own salvation. So all prayer is futile.

And then I remembered I had seen the young mother going to the pagoda on the hilltop with a little offering of a few roses or an orchid spray, and pouring out her soul in passionate supplication to Someone — Someone unknown to her sacred books — that her firstborn might recover of his fever, and be to her once more the measureless

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
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776 delight of her life; and it would seem to me that
779 she must believe in a God and in prayer after all.
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So though I found much in these books that
771 was believed by the people, and much that was
779 to them the guiding influence of their lives, yet I
182 was unable to trust to them altogether, and I was in doubt where to seek for the real beliefs of these people. If I went to their monks, their holy men, the followers of the great teacher, Gaudama, they referred me to their books as containing all that a Buddhist believed; and when I pointed out the discrepancies, they only shook their heads, and said that the people were an ignorant people and confused their beliefs in that way.

779 When I asked what was a Buddhist, I was told
795 that, to be a Buddhist, a man must be accepted into
182 the religion with certain rites, certain ceremonies, he must become for a time a member of the community of the monks of the Buddha, and that a Buddhist was he who was so accepted, and who thereafter held by the teachings of the Buddha.

But when I searched the life of the Buddha, I could not find any such ceremonies necessary at all. So that it seemed that the religion of the Buddha was one religion, and the religion of the Buddhists another; but when I said so to the monks, they were horror-struck, and said that it was because I did not understand.

114 In my perplexity I fell back, as we all must, to
182 my own thoughts and those of my own people; and
779 I tried to imagine how a Burman would act if he
101 came to England to search into the religion of the English and to know the impulses of our lives.

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
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I saw how he would be sent to the Bible as the source of our religion, how he would be told to study that if he would know what we believed and what we did not—what it was that gave colour to our lives. I followed him in imagination as he took the Bible and studied it, and then went forth and watched our acts, and I could see him puzzled, as I was now puzzled when I studied his people.

I thought of him reading the New Testament, and how he would come to these verses:

'27. But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you,

'28. Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you.

'29. And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek, offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloke, forbid him not to take thy coat also.

'30. Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again.'

He would read them again and again, these wonderful verses, that he was told the people and Church believed, and then he would go forth to observe the result of this belief. And what would he see? He would see this: A nation proud and revengeful, glorying in her victories, always at war, a conqueror of other peoples, a mighty hater of her enemies. He would find that in the public life of the nation with other nations there was no thought of this command. He would find, too, in her inner life, that the man who took a cloak was not forgiven, but was terribly punished—he used to be hanged.

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
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CHAPTER V

WAR—I

'Love each other and live in peace.'
Saying of the Buddha.

THIS is the Buddhist belief as I have understood it, and I have written so far in order to explain what follows. For my object is not to explain what the Buddha taught, but what the Burmese believe; and this is not quite the same thing, though in nearly every action of their life the influence of Buddhism is visible more or less strongly. Therefore I propose to describe shortly the ideas of the Burmese people upon the main objects of life; and to show how much or how little Buddhism has affected their conceptions. I will begin with courage.

I think it will be evident that there is no quality upon which the success of a nation so much depends as upon its courage. No nation can rise to a high place without being brave; it cannot maintain its independence even; it cannot push forward upon any path of life without courage. Nations that are cowards must fail.

I am aware that the courage of a nation depends, as do its other qualities, upon many things: its

16:Fielding Hall G-3 (1885-1890) 1898 AP1 Burma
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CHAPTER XXII

THE POTTER'S WHEEL

'Life is like a great whirlpool wherein we are dashed to and fro by our passions.'—*Saying of the Buddha.*

779 761 182 It is a hard teaching, this of the Buddha about death. It is a teaching that may appeal to the reason, but not to the soul. That when life goes out, this thing which we call 'I' goes out with it, and that love and remembrance are dead for ever.

It is so hard a teaching that in its purity the people cannot believe it. They accept it, but they have added on to it a belief which changes the whole form of it, a belief that is the outcome of that weakness of humanity which insists that death is not and cannot be all.

Though to the strict Buddhist death is the end of all worldly passion, to the Burmese villager that is not so. He cannot grasp, he cannot endure that it should be so, and he has made for himself out of Buddhism a belief that is opposed to all Buddhism in this matter.

775 He believes in the transmigration of souls, in the survival of the 'I.' The teaching that what survives

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first a bewildered refugee, but gradually assumed the role of a labourer rising in the ranks. The case indicates the mobility of the Burmese family and shows clearly that it may function successfully outside of the confines of its original social atmosphere.

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The family in Burmese society: The successful mobility of U Myaing's family indicate that the immediate family is the primary social unit of Burmese society. The Burmese community is then a congregation of immediate families who engage in activities of mutual benefit within the protective framework of the village structure. This interpretation high lights a particular type of individualism which is a family individualism depending on the roles of each

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member of the family for its full expression. This concept seems tied to the Buddhist idea of individual salvation through acts of merit on the one hand and the exigencies of gaining a livelihood on the other.

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The family is the basic economic unit and though it will enter cooperative endeavours (like the IN fisheries, or communal nat propitiations), has the ultimate responsibility and capabilities of supporting itself.

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The extended family is important, as indeed is the total village social structure, only in so far as it contributes to the maintenance of the individual immediate family of procreation including spouses, offspring and aged parents. The "looseness" of the social structure conversely allows mobility of the immediate families. This analysis indicates that attempts at modernising of the Burmese people (acculturation) should meet with a minimum of structural obstacles - such as caste, clan and rigid associations might present.

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The Burmese culture pattern and the individual: The village culture pattern is dominated by a series of relatively simple, interrelated ideas held by all. Each individual feels himself temporily occupying a particular situation which is only one of many existences and but an instant in eternity. He is fated to be a member of a particular family with a set of opportunities through life. Life should be pleasant and must be virtuous if future existences are to be pleasant. He must realise as fully as possible the talents and opportunities that come to him through his KARMA situation. In the villages this concept is a great stabilising force and tends to make an individual content with

29: Slater M-4 (no date) 1951 APl Burma
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CHAPTER III

NIBBĀNA IN BURMESE BUDDHISM

1. A Positive Concept

It is still widely believed that the Buddha's teaching was fundamentally pessimistic, a philosophy of world and life negation culminating in a conception of Nibbāna as extinction or annihilation. It is also believed that while the Northern or Mahāyāna school developed more positive tendencies, picturing the goal as a Paradise of joy, the original pessimism is faithfully reflected and even emphasised in the southern, Hīnayāna school.

Thus Schweitzer concludes that the Buddha conceived deliverance from transmigration "as a complete cessation of life which is attained by direct renunciation of the will-to-live" and that Hīnayāna Buddhism continues this original doctrine.[1] Although he qualifies this conclusion by a preliminary distinction between 'thought' and 'religious belief,' and also by a passing reference to more recent interpretations of original Buddhism, he remains convinced that the Buddha's thinking was "dominated by world and life negation."[2]

But if the analysis of Burmese Buddhism presented in our two previous chapters is accepted, there would appear to be reason for challenging this generally accepted opinion, both in regard to the Buddha's original teaching and the Hīnayāna reflection of that teaching. For here in the heart of this southern school is a people who certainly manifest a very lively will to live, yet a people indoctrinated by the Hīnayāna faith. This faith, as it is found in Burma, cannot be summarily dismissed as world-denying. It has shaped and maintained a very definite civilisation. It expresses itself in a closely-knit community life. It is still vigorous.

In such a context, we should expect, not a negative, but a positive concept of Nibbāna.

It is the purpose of this present chapter to show that this expectation is realised. Not only among the laity, in the 'popular religion,' but among the monks, there is an essentially positive concept of Nibbāna. Popular

[1] *Indian Thought and Its Development*, chap. VI, pp. 97, 122.
[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 110, 116.

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belief is encouraged by 'scholastic' interpretation to a greater extent than might be expected.

It is perhaps relevant, and not without significance, to state that this was not the conclusion I anticipated when I began this inquiry. It seemed to me, as to others, that the general emphasis of the Hīnayāna Saṃgha, and of the Pali Canon, was towards a negative interpretation of Nibbāna. Therefore I expected to find a divergence between popular belief and monastic exposition, a latent, if not explicit, conflict. It was part of my original hypothesis to show how affirmative emphases in religion are maintained in the face of philosophical, credal definitions which might deny or discourage these emphases. Burma seemed to present a striking illustration of such a situation. Here, obviously, was a buoyant, life-affirming popular faith which claimed to be Hīnayāna Buddhism; here, too, was a long established monastic Order, firm in its allegiance to the Pali Canon. Such an allegiance, I thought, implied a negative interpretation of Buddhism and a negative conception of Nibbāna; therefore the popular faith must have persisted in disregard of this 'official' interpretation.

Further inquiry, however, has led me to doubt whether the facts substantiate this hypothesis of conflict. The initial fact, it is true, still stands. There can be little doubt about the *popular* view of Nibbāna. As Jardine remarks in a footnote to Sangermano's account, 'for a long period the masses have revolted at the conclusion (that Nibbāna means annihilation), and, in some way, which they cannot very intelligibly explain, believe that the individual soul survives death and is found in new conditions of existence.'[2] Except perhaps for the use of the term, soul, this remark, written sixty years ago, is still a fair summary of the popular attitude. What is ambiguous, what has now to be questioned in the light of the evidence which will be stated in this chapter, is the reference of the term, revolt. If it is conceived as a revolt against the teaching of the Burma Saṃgha, then the question arises whether there was, in fact, any ground or cause for such a revolt so far as a negative or positive emphasis is concerned. Monastic conceptions doubtless differed from popular conceptions. Nevertheless it would now appear that monastic interpretations in Burma left the way open to some kind of belief in personal survival in Nibbāna. In this respect, scholar and peasant were not so far apart. And if we go behind the Burmese Saṃgha and consult the Pali Canon, as it is being interpreted today in many quarters, there, too, we find ground for revised opinion: if there are passages of apparently negative import, expressed in negative terms, there are also other expositions of very different import.

[2] *Op. cit.*, chap. XIV, p. 106, footnote.

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Nihilistic interpreters there may have been, especially perhaps in the Sinhalese schools. But such interpreters do not seem to have figured largely among the members of the Burma Saṃgha. The idea, therefore, of a popular, buoyant faith persisting against the discouragement of ecclesiastical or philosophical interpretation has at least to be modified, if not abandoned, in regard to Burma.

Not that scholar and peasant thought alike. For the one pursued a difficult psychological analysis, and the other clung to pictures; the one conceived Nibbāna as a heavenly *condition*, the other thought of a heavenly *place*. This, if any, is the pertinent distinction. But it is not a distinction which breeds a conflict between a negative and positive outlook. In neither case is Nibbāna annihilation.

2. *Conclusions of previous investigators*

It is illuminating to glance at the conclusions arrived at by previous Western observers in this field, for such a review shows a gradual retreat from the first unqualified impression that Nibbāna, even in the popular view, signified annihilation. There may, of course, have been a change in the Burmese outlook itself, as missionaries of other faiths, especially the Christian faith, entered the country and the people became more subject to the influence, direct and indirect, of Western thought. I doubt, however, if this is the explanation, for Bishop Bigandet, as will be seen, was convinced that the popular view, at least, was not nihilistic and Bigandet made his inquiries long before the country was penetrated by missionaries. It is much more probable that growing knowledge and opportunity gave Western observers a better understanding of what had, in fact, been the true situation all along.

One of the first reports ever recorded for the information of the West was penned by a cultured and observant American woman who arrived in the port of Rangoon early in July, 1813 and immediately began the study of the Burmese language. This was Ann Judson, the wife of the famous Baptist missionary. In a letter written to a friend in England some years later, Mrs Judson gives a brief summary of the Buddhist faith as she discerned it. She had no doubt in her mind that Nibbāna signified annihilation.

"The Burmans are Boodhists or a nation of atheists. They believe that existence involves in itself the principles of misery and destruction; consequently, there is no Eternal God. The whole universe, they say, is only destruction and re-production. It therefore becomes a wise man to raise his desires above all things that exist, and aspire to *Nipban*, the state in which there is no existence. Rewards and punishments follow

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think otherwise. Orthodoxy does not require it. The Buddha's teaching has been misunderstood. "They thought his ideal was Death, yet it was Life.... Only in Burma did the faith survive in somewhat of its early form."[24]

In a report published in 1914, replies to a questionnaire from some thirty correspondents indicate, according to the editors, "that there are inconsistencies in the current views." Buddhists in the Shan States, the Burmese borderland "hold a two-fold conception of Nirvana, conceptions that are absolutely contradictory, and are admitted to be so. They may all say that Nirvana is complete extinction of being ... and that the place or state is mysterious and inexplicable, and with the same breath they may, and do, call Nirvana the City of Gold, the Country of Happiness and Peace, a Home unutterably surpassing any earthly home." Their Burmese cousins are in similar case. "Agnosticism is the only orthodox attitude" but few are satisfied with this attitude. Thus, while some correspondents report that in popular opinion Nirvana signifies extinction of all being, others agree with Mr Charles Duroiselle that the great mass of the people 'believe in a life to come after the Arhat's death.' Mr Duroiselle adds that some of the monks, too, share this view, though others state that Nirvana is complete extinction and most of them say that it is a mystery: no one knows what it really is.[25]

We have, then, a series of reports, covering a century, by Western residents in Burma who made a serious attempt to discover what their Burmese neighbours really thought about Nibbāna. They begin with the report that Nibbāna signifies annihilation. But it is interesting to note that as time goes on this impression is qualified; positive as well as negative conceptions are discovered; and it is emphasised that Nibbāna spells mystery. Finally, we have a statement which is described as contradictory, but which, perhaps, might be better described as paradoxical.

3. Popular ideas of Nibbāna

We have now to consider the question introduced at the beginning of this chapter: the relation between the popular conception of Nibbāna and the teaching of the Saṃgha. The observations we have been considering may seem to indicate a considerable divergence between the two. On the one hand we have a popular conception which is said to flout orthodoxy; on the other hand, there is the teaching of the monks which may be supposed to exalt orthodoxy.

[24] *The Inward Light*, chap. XX, pp. 196, 198; cf. chap. XXII, pp. 219, 220.
[25] W. C. B. Purser and K. J. Saunders (editors), *Modern Buddhism in Burma*, pp. 48—50.

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Several consequent questions arise. How, for example, can we account for the persistence of this popular heresy, if indeed it be heresy, in view of the fact that the monastic Order is so influential? Heresies, it is true, flourish underground in every religion. But this 'heresy' is very much above ground. Are the monks themselves heretical, or the laity less heretical than they may appear to be?

Partial explanations will at once come to mind. Appeal may be made to the Buddhist emphasis on toleration, and further appeal may be made to the recognised distinction between what is expected of the layman and what is expected of the monk: the layman cannot be required to understand the truth which is only attained through monkish disciplines. These explanations are pertinent. But they are not sufficient.

The further explanation is to be found in certain undertones, certain basic tendencies, certain similarities of approach which influence monks and laity alike. These may be summed up and defined as the Agnostic Emphasis and the Ethical Emphasis. Making these emphases, though in different ways, learned bhikkus and simple villagers are in deeper, more effective sympathy than might be supposed if we merely isolate and regard their more explicit and divergent conceptions. In both cases, the resultant outlook is positive rather than negative. Hence the persistence of a lively popular faith which may seem at times to contradict its own basic dogmas.

In the following paragraphs, I shall select those results of my own inquiries which may elucidate this situation. I shall attempt to show how, in Burmese Buddhism, a fundamental agnosticism is derived in part from ethical considerations, and, secondly, how this agnosticism is associated with a positive faith, differently expressed but jointly affirmed by monk and layman, scholar and peasant.

The popular conception of Nibbāna will concern us first. But here there is need for discrimination. Whom have we in mind when we speak of this popular opinion? Burma is a country of villages, and we may conceive some very primitive peasant whose only concern is his rice field, his plough and his oxen. Over against such a simple peasant we may set the scholarly monk. But we must also bear in mind that large, intermediate class, already noted, which includes the more instructed layman and the less instructed monk.

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Nor should we exaggerate the simplicity of the Burmese villager. The Burmese may be a rural community, but they are also a civilised community, schooled and intelligent, very conscious of the difference between their conditions and the conditions of the surrounding, more primitive hill tribes. On the other hand, in seeking to estimate the popular opinion, we must be equally alert against the temptation to

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identify the majority of the people with the comparatively few sophisticated Burmans to be found in the larger towns.

With this qualification in mind, we can agree with those observers who represent the popular conception of Nibbāna as a picture of some superheaven, some final sphere of complete happiness. We can also agree that they are right in distinguishing this conception from the ideas of the learned bhikkus. This is what must be said if the issue is pressed to the point of definition. But who exerts this pressure, who requires this definition, who is it that is bold to be explicit? Not the villager himself! It is the outside observer, the scholar impatient to complete his analysis. The villager himself is reserved and hesitant. He is far from attempting any explication. He is much too aware of the fact that for him Nibbāna is a distant prospect, wrapt in mystery. In a vague way he sees Nibbāna as the end of a chequered existence, the beginning of an entirely different and better life, in a vague way he may picture Nibbāna as he pictures the legendary heavens, but always in a vague way. He is never as explicit as the inquisitive inquirer wants him to be.

Nor is this hesitation solely characteristic of the more simple, more inarticulate villager. I recall a conversation with a Buddhist journalist. He was very clear and prompt in most of his answers to my questions. He distinguished lucidly, for example, between prayer and Buddhist meditation. He was convinced that Buddhism allowed no place for belief in God. He emphasised that Buddhists could not be said to believe in 'transmigration' since they rejected any 'soul' theory. But when it came to the question of Nibbāna, he paused. Nibbāna was not annihilation. On that he was clear. What *did* it mean then? Well, it might mean Life — life in contrast, perhaps, to 'mere existence' — but he added quickly that it was impossible to define. Nibbāna was a *mystery*.

This conversation was typical of many others I held with laymen. Typical, too, was the hesitation concerning Nibbāna. In one or two cases I was reminded that the Buddha himself did not consider the subject profitable. The scripture was maybe recalled: the complaint, for example, of the dissatisfied monk that the Buddha had left many questions unsettled, and the Buddha's reply: "Anyone who should say, 'I will not lead the religious life under Buddha until Buddha explains all these points' that man would die before Buddha had ever explained these points to him."[26]

The blind men and the elephant have often been quoted to me. Each blind man touched a different part of the elephant, and each one naturally came to a different conclusion. The man who felt the trunk said it

[26] *M.I.* 426.; cf. De La Vallée Poussin, *The Way to Nirvana*, pp. 128, 129.

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was a plough handle. He who felt the body was sure it was a granary. They wrangled about it and came to blows. In the scriptures, Buddha is said to have told the story to expose foolish teachers who argue beyond their knowledge.[27] My Burmese friends told the story to emphasise their own blindness. There are things beyond the ken of ordinary men, and a wise man recognises the fact.

Some ventured a simile, generally the simile of the dying flame, extinguished when the oil was exhausted in the lamp. It signified, they said, the end of *taṇhā* — the lusts and greed which distracted life now. (I do not recall that the translation 'Desire' was much used: there was greater emphasis on the heats and passions of life). Therefore life as we knew it now ceased to be. As to the life, the Nibbāna life which would follow, who could say? Comparisons from this present life were obviously misleading. Nibbāna was a mystery.

But it was never 'nothing.' I cannot recall a single Burmese friend who interpreted Nibbāna as annihilation.

To the simple villager, it has been said, Nibbāna is a super-heaven.[28] An ultimate heaven, a further Beyond, would perhaps be a better description, for it is doubtful whether many actually picture Nibbāna as *similar* to the heavens of imagination or legend. Sir George Scott's cautionary words bring us nearer the truth: "Buddhists have in their six heavens and twenty superior seats a choice of every kind of bliss, suited to every liking.... Yet all these ideal realms of phantasy ... have nothing to do with the state of Neh'ban.... The Buddhist system is much too logical to trouble itself with such incomprehensible problems, and in order to create no false impressions, the teachers surround the last state with the utmost possible uncertainty of expression."[29] By and large, the people follow this lead.

The agnostic emphasis in regard to Nibbāna, has, I am persuaded, penetrated the Burmese mind much more deeply than is sometimes supposed. And with it, closely joined, the ethical emphasis.

To supplement and confirm my own impressions, I have sought the aid of several correspondents. The reply of one of these, a widely travelled Hindu medical doctor, whose philanthropic work in the villages of Upper Burma has given him an intimate knowledge of village mentality, is illuminating: "About Neikban, ... though the Pali scriptural idea is the

[27] Udāna (v. Woodward, *The Minor Anthologies of the Buddhist Canon*, chap. VI, section 68).

[28] Prof. J. A. Stewart has drawn my attention to the significance of the Burmese proverb, *Hnit that ga sayu, pyaw ga Neikban*: What you like is ambrosia, where you are happy is Nibbāna.

[29] *The Burmans*, Vol. I, chap. XI, p. 127.

29: Slater M-4 (no date) 1951 APl Burma
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extinction of the 'ego', the people understand it differently .... The popular idea is that every successive birth is either better or worse according to one's actions in this present one, till finally, when one has led a 'perfect' life according to Buddhist precepts, one is not reborn more. When one attains Nibbāna, one's rebirth ceases, and one remains permanently in an exalted state." At first reading, this statement may seem neither more nor less illuminating than many similar summaries. But if it is closely examined it will be seen that it includes an *ethical reference* which is often missing in other summaries. It is the 'perfect life' which qualifies for Nibbāna — the quest for the perfect life through successive rebirths, through all the realms and all the intermediate heavens. Instead, then, of saying that Nibbāna is patterned after the imagery of these intermediate heavens, is it not a more discerning interpretation to say that the way through these heavens is patterned after the accepted Way to Nibbāna? The heavens of primitive belief and traditional legend remain. Buddhism has not displaced them. What Buddhism has done is to challenge more primitive conceptions of the way of life which spells progress through these heavens. It has brought into the heart of earlier imaginations an ethical reference.

Now the average Burman is honest enough to admit that there is still a wide gulf between his accepted ethical ideal and his ethical practice. Not only is he still very far from perfection, but he is not as strongly disposed to seek it as he might be. Cynics, indeed, have remarked that many Burmans seem in no great hurry to attain Nibbāna. Few, perhaps, are as frank about it as the lively Queen Caw of Pagan who expressed her very qualified aspirations in the following dedicatory inscription:

"Meantime, *before I reach Nirvāṇa* by virtue of this great work of merit I have done, may I prosper as a man.... More especially I would have a long life, freedom from disease, a lovely complexion, a pleasant voice and a beautiful figure. I would be the loved and honoured darling of every man and spirit. Gold, silver, rubies, corals, pearls and other lifeless treasure, elephants, horses and other living treasure — may I have lots of them.... Wherever I am born, may I be fulfilled with noble graces, charity, faith, piety, wisdom, etc., and not know one speck of misery; *and after I have tasted and enjoyed the happiness of men and the happiness of spirits*, when the noble law of deliverance called the fruit of Sanctity blossoms, may I at last attain the peaceful bliss of Nirvāṇa."[29]

The Burman is human, — as human as those Christians who have prayed, after the manner of the hesitant Augustine, "Give me chastity

[29] *A.S. Burma, List of Inscriptions*, no. 334; quoted Bay, *Theravāda Buddhism in Burma* chap. II, p. 165.